

MCA Event -- Shepherd's Hey Farm
September 15, 2017
Remarks by David H. Langstaff

Thanks... Welcome.... Introductory comments...

You know what I am here to say.... I want to thank you for all that you do, and for being here. In addition, I ask for your continued support of the Montgomery Countryside Alliance, and the Agricultural Reserve. But, please allow me to exercise the host's prerogative and share a few thoughts...

There are moments in time when great things are done; and there are moments in time when necessary things are done. History tends to have a smoothing effect, and we don't remember how hard it was to realize these accomplishments. It is easy to take the hard work for granted.

Let me give you 3 examples:

We celebrate the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4 every year. We read it in schools, but largely take it for granted. We don't remember, or give a lot of thought to how hard it was to create. We forget the rancor, the debates, the closeness of the votes – all preceding what eventually was, and had to be, unanimous passage by the colonies.

Above all – signing the Declaration of Independence was an act of treason led not by those with *little* to lose, but by the wealthy landowners, farmers and businessmen -- Hancock, Franklin, Jefferson, and in Maryland: William Paca, Thomas Stone, Samuel Chase, and Charles Carroll -- the leaders of society who had the *most* to lose! **What they had was a vision and a set of values worth committing to, and fighting for...**

A second example: consider the establishment of our national parks. The one that caught my attention is the Oregon Lake Malheur Reservation, where citizens sought to set aside about 100,000 acres for preservation. This reservation is almost exactly the size of the Agricultural Reserve.

The debate was contentious, and went on for a number of years. The arguments against it came from people making the same arguments we hear today: the land could be more economically productive, protecting the land didn't help the average citizen, and setting

aside the land actually was a detriment to society given the opportunity cost of what development could bring.

It took the tireless efforts of citizens – the names of whom we don't remember - over many years which finally culminated in President Theodore Roosevelt naming it a National Park in 1908.

This story is not an isolated case. So many of the names we are familiar with -- Yellowstone, Glacier National Park, the Grand Canyon -- faced similar challenges. In fact, two-thirds of our existing national parks faced significant opposition at the time they were established. But what the proponents had was **a vision and a set of values worth committing to, and fighting for.**

The third example is Central Park, in New York City.

The proponents had to overcome constant opposition for nearly 30 years, from 1844 to 1873. I was struck by the statement of purpose for Central Park, as reported by Sarah Waxman in 'History of Central Park':

“The purpose was to refute the European view that Americans lacked a sense of civic duty and appreciation for cultural refinement and instead possessed an unhealthy and individualistic materialism that precluded interest in the common good.”

Central Park was envisioned in the 1840s and early 1850s to be New York City's Hyde Park, or Bois de Boulogne. At the time, in the US, the idea that public parks should exist at all was a radical idea. Now, of course, Central Park is the most visited park in America, is a National Historic Landmark and a UNESCO World Heritage site. What it took was a group of citizens having **a vision and set of values worth committing to, and fighting for.**

I was struck by Frederick Law Olmstead's comment; he called Central Park: *‘A democratic development of the highest significance.’*

Why do I cite these examples? Mark Twain was noted to observe that while *‘history doesn't repeat itself, it certainly rhymes.’* I think what we – and the Montgomery Countryside Alliance – are trying to do today, and the obstacles we are facing, reflects that rhyme. The good news is that fighting for the Ag Reserve in Montgomery Cty is not a treasonous act! But, it too is an example of a few people having **a vision and set of values worth committing to, and fighting for.**

The late Rev. Peter Gomes, an old friend of Cyndie's and mine, was Chaplain at the Harvard University Memorial Church. He wrote about the purpose of education, and spoke of the importance of developing character in young people that led them to choose the 'hard right' in face of the 'easy wrong.' In Montgomery County, the easy wrong is to just develop – because it appears to deliver a *short-term* economic benefit. The hard right is to think about the character of where we live: the non-economic factors, the quality of life, the health of the earth, and also the *long-term* economic benefits. It is hard because the benefits are felt over time, not necessarily immediately.

I think for all of us, at this time, it is a 'gut check' moment, when a lot of our values are being questioned. Personally, I believe history will show this time as one marked by the overwhelming dominance of short-term thinking, with disastrous long-term implications and costs – in business, in government, in how we address climate change and the environment ----- and how we address congestion and development pressures in Montgomery County.

The Montgomery Countryside Alliance deserves your support, and you're showing it by being here tonight..... thank you.

But, we need to do more. I encourage you to think about MCA and the Agricultural Reserve in a broader context – as a push-back against the prevalent short-term thinking of our time, and as an investment in our long-term, and in our values. It is *our* moment to act on our values... on the principles that bind our community -- as our founding fathers did in establishing the framework and principles of our country as President Roosevelt did in establishing national parks; as Frederic Law Olmstead and others did in setting aside land for Central Park; and as Royce Hansen, working with many of you here, did in envisioning the Agricultural Reserve in Montgomery County, MD.

The rest of us may not have been here at the time, but we - and the county and our region - benefit from their vision, and the hard work required to get this far. Let's not lose it! Don't just support it by coming to nice dinners.... Make supporting the Montgomery Countryside Alliance and the Agricultural Reserve a top priority.

Those who follow us will never know the hard fight it took to set it up and protect it... they won't know our names. But, our children and those in generations that follow will thank us for it... and know that there were people here over many years who had **a vision and set of values worth committing to, and fighting for.**

Thank you.